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Sensing the City

Authors: Caleb Johnston* and Hayden Lorimer

*Address for correspondence:

Dr Caleb Johnston
The University of Edinburgh,
School of Geosciences
Drummond Library,
Surgeon's Square,
Drummond Street
Edinburgh, EH8 9XP

Email: caleb.johnston@ed.ac.uk

Sensing the city

Caleb Johnston and Hayden Lorimer

Introduction

In January 2013, we¹ came together in Vancouver, Canada, for the production of *Do You See What I Mean?* (*DYSWIM*), a site-specific work of contemporary theatre developed in a multi-year collaboration between a geographer, community organizations, and professional theatre and dance artists. The creation of French directors Martin Chaput and Martial Chazallon, *DYSWIM* staged an elaborate urban choreography, wherein individual audience members were blindfolded and guided through an immersive 2.5-hour tour of the public spaces, storefronts and private homes of Vancouver.

In this short essay, we offer a series of entry points into this innovative project that offered a sensory engagement with urban life, at the same time as scrambling the familiar visual economy of the city. Alongside photographs depicting scenes of sensual experiment, we present a written account explaining the origins, mechanics and choreography of an artwork that deploys the city as stage, weaving staged routes through the built environment, while accommodating the spontaneities of social encounter and exchange. Explanation of *DYSWIM* then shifts perspective, embedding within one experiential account of being led blind. We then emerge from this personal narrative of journeying with some closing reflections on how the project afforded participants an opportunity to rediscover the everyday city, their bodies, and the intimate, sensory ways we feel our surrounding urban landscape.



Figure 1. Sensual encounters. Photos by © Bernaerts L.

Origins, mechanics, choreography

Originating in 2010, and spanning a two-year period, *DYSWIM* was developed through two creation residencies in Vancouver, and then a month-long rehearsal and production process that culminated in six critically acclaimed performances to capacity audiences as part of the 2013 PuSh International Performing Arts Festival (www.pushfestival.ca/shows/do-you-see-what-i-mean/). The project was featured within the Festival's *Fiction(s)* series, a suite of sited artistic works from Denmark, Buenos Aires and Lyon, a collection curated to put art into greater public conversation in Vancouver. *DYSWIM* asked audiences to (re)discover the city, to be blindfolded and to meet a stranger who would guide them through the urban terrain over several hours.

The 'performance' began with a blindfold. Only after audience members were blindfolded were they introduced to their guide, equipped with a map and umbrella, and sent out in pairs every 15 minutes through the back-alley door of Access Gallery in Vancouver's Chinatown. From there, pairs traversed the Downtown Eastside, making their way southward

toward the tour's terminus at the Roundhouse Community Arts and Recreation Centre, covering approximately 4 km (2.4 miles). Guides were responsible for the timing of their walks, and they were asked not to improvise or deviate from the routes demarked on customized maps; they were also expected not to describe or reveal any information to blindfolded audience members that would enable them to identify their location in the city. Participants were thus encouraged to imagine and sense their surroundings.

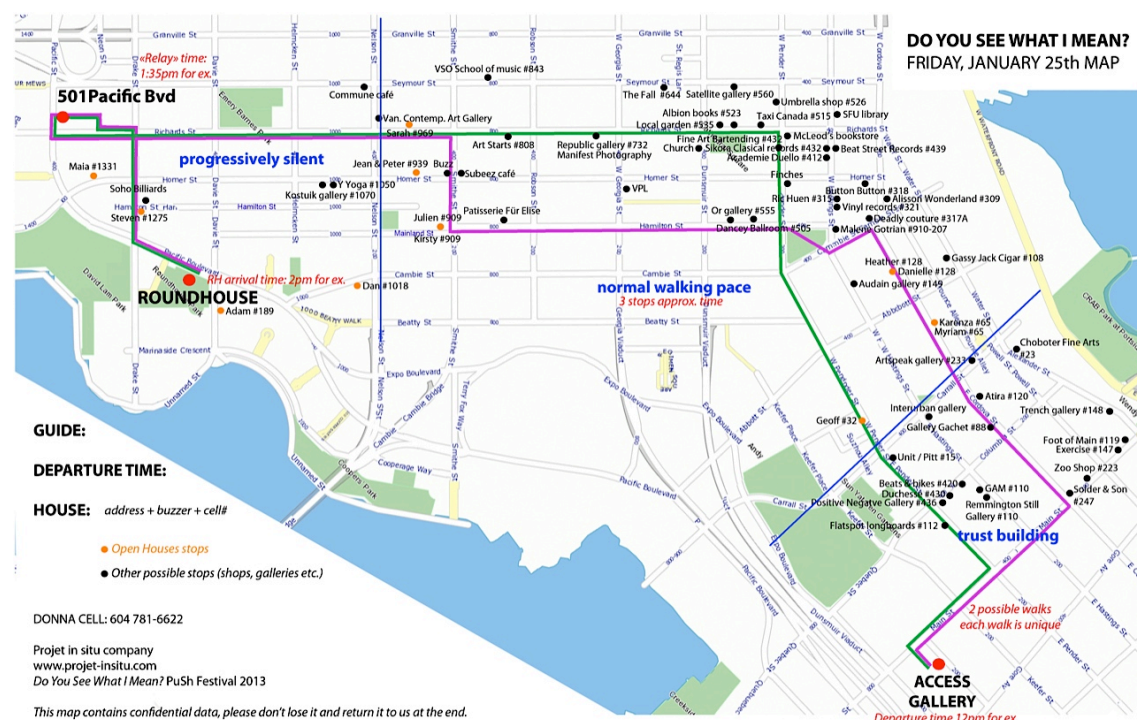


Figure 2. Mapping guided tours.

Over two weekends, 240 people experienced the guided tour, and the project (as a whole) involved 83 volunteer guides, 26 businesses, 11 blind guides from the Canadian National Institute for the Blind, 12 residential homes, 8 artists, and a technical crew—it was an ambitious logistical operation. Each guided tour was unique, and much effort was made by the directorial team to map and determine individual pathways and journeys (Figure 2). Moving through the urban landscape, blindfolded audience members and their guides could have entered a range of public and private spaces: Patisserie Für Elise or Holy Rosary

Cathedral, a rooftop garden perched high above the city or the Interurban Gallery, Vancouver Contemporary Art Gallery or Atira Women's Society, Vancouver Symphony Orchestra's School of Music or Beat Street Records, Vancouver Public Library or Audain Gallery, Duchess Vintage or Fine Art Bartending.



Figure 3. Photos by © Bernaerts L.

Participants also entered into private homes, whose residents staged different encounters: telling favorite stories; preparing a meal; sharing personal objects; playing with children; and touching, smelling and eating favourite foods. Project directors, Chaput and Chazallon, had worked closely with residents to design a happenstance that spoke to and animated some aspect of each resident's intimate life. They also worked with a number of blind and partially sighted volunteer guides, who designed their own spatial encounters in 501 Pacific—a condominium in Vancouver's Yaletown area. Audience members were handed over to a blind or partially sighted guide who navigated through the different spaces in the building (Figure 3). They could have engaged with a number of different rooms: a steamy pool, where they removed their socks and waded into heated water; a felted table, where they explored the surface and attempted a game of billiards; or a downstairs common room, where they spent time feeling the textured concrete surfaces and columns.



Figure 4. Photo by © Bernaerts L.

Photo by © Caleb Johnston

Arriving in the Roundhouse Theatre, the blindfolded tour entered its final phase. A clock was projected against a black backdrop, marking the passage of time. The production team had stripped the space back to its brick walls, with seating removed and curtains opened to reveal the street. With no knowledge that they were in a theatre, participants were handed over to a professional dancer who led them through a loosely structured contact improvisation (Figure 4). After two hours walking blindfolded through the streets of Vancouver, this encounter was designed to explore expanded movement and to extend a heightened sense of embodiment gleaned through the guided tour, to—in the words of one project dancer—‘give audience members an understanding of their bodies.’ Some participants were liberated in their movements, testing the boundaries of what their dancer guide would safely allow in the space available; others worked by smaller gestures, discovering the texture of the room’s rough walls or the smoothness of the matted floor. From there, audience members were led into a small constructed room in the main gallery of the Roundhouse to sit and listen to a live feedback loop performed by two artists. Provided with pen and paper, audience members were encouraged to jot down words that communicated their experience. Over the course of performances, these reflections were used to add to the live feedback loop as well as form an exhibited collage. The tour ended when each pairing was given the chance to greet each other face-to-face, or for a farewell to happen with the blindfold still on (Figure 5). With a mutual

decision taken, the blindfold was finally removed, or the pair parted without the audience member having ever ‘seen’ his/her guide. The show was over.



Figure 5. Photos by © Caleb Johnston

Walking blind, senses primed

Many trips taken through the heart of the city are figured in terms of excitement and excess, anticipation and spectacle. Governed by a well-worn habit of visual expectancy, they reflect what might accurately be called “the sightseer’s charter”. It’s a charter that has long dominated our idea of how urban encounters ought to take place, and is based on the need to feed a hungry eye that “looks first, and thinks later”. So as urban journeys go, *DYSWIM* was certainly unusual. Volunteering to undertake an experimental journey shaped by sensory deprivation seems an uncommon subject position to adopt; save that is for the many thousands whose MP3 headphones shut out a greater world of sound during the daily commute. Then again, being led around the streets blindfolded is a very different sensual engagement. It is to become another kind of person. It is to be self-estranged. So in downtown Vancouver, and for one afternoon only, one of us lost touch with ordinary reality.

Of course, this should come as no great surprise. Snuffing out the light, and replacing it with darkness is a dramatic act, and a deeply symbolic one too. Even when the conditions created for blindness are self-imposed and carefully choreographed, the physical reality of sight loss was always likely to arrive as a shock to the system. But along the way, something

else went AWOL. Authority. *My* authority: to report back with the sort of writing that happily fronts the researcher's conditioned confidence and conviction. Even on those occasions when words are said to emerge from amidst *observant* research practice, we've come to expect an interpretation of events that is fully formed, expressed surely. "Trust me, these are truths well told". There is little certainty to be found when re-reading the field notes taken immediately after participating in *DYSWIM*. Mostly there are phrases with frayed edges. They strive, but are somehow still wanting.

For sure, the words put down offer selective routes back towards tiny intensities: in my guide's deftness of touch, quickly twinning our body languages, such that we moved in trust. To momentary fears: the wind-rush produced by passing traffic, incredibly loud and extremely close. To soft brushings: with big architecture, dimpled surfaces and awkward objects. To odorous atmospheres: the gossamer drift of a fresh scent, the will o' the wisp that is cigarette smoke, the fetid wafts issuing up from the city's underbelly. To simple generosity: the taste of lemon tea sipped in an unseen living room. To the briefest of encounters: flavorsome fun tasting "freebie" handouts in a food hall. To snatches of dialogue: rendered more intriguing when freed of context. To the occasional sidewalk misstep: when a toe stubbed on a curbstone or a footstep did fall wrong. And if this begins to read like a laundry list of isolated occasions, then there's a good reason for that. While walking blind, my patterns of thought seemed most secure when fastened to specific events or occurrences, as if in an effort to populate the built environment with "known knowns".

But for all these efforts at recall, what we have to offer is dogged by a deeper, sense of partiality. And this is not born of a failing memory or the result of poor note taking. Rather, it is partial because, in existential terms, the journey taken was so baffling and profound as to remain largely a mystery. If the gist of *DYSWIM* remains elusive, perhaps *this* is its most telling and abiding quality.

Sensuous thinking

These sensuous geographies are singular. And doubtless slanted too, by an awareness that a writing plan travelled in the walker's shadow. So how far do these reflections, about creative engagements with self-experience and the urban milieu, chorus with those of other blindfolded participants? In-depth, differential consideration of *DYSWIM* is not the purpose of this piece. What can be said surely is that the experience of journeying blinded but guided, over a relatively long period of time, was complexly and diversely affective. Many were visibly moved at the end of the tour, sometimes inexplicably so. 'I don't know why. I just sat down and started bawling', related one walker as she gradually re-acclimatized. There were no words to rationalize her emotional response. For others, the rapport felt was more directly channeled; as for one young man, for instance, whose mother was one of the blind volunteer guides also participating in the project.

There were a range of post-performance responses to the specially staged aspects of the walks and the social encounters that were facilitated. Many participants spoke directly of revelatory experience, where the city conjured enchantments from ordinary bodies and mobilities. 'To walk around blindfolded made me relate to my body differently', noted one participating artist, 'It was really interesting to hear the urban spaces, and move through them. The sensory experience was really kind of profound... I didn't feel particularly safe with the person who was guiding me, they were walking too fast; I crashed into things a couple times. So I realized, I take care of myself. And that was a great thing... that made me sit in my body differently, on my spine differently... For me, it was learning about my body differently'.² 'I started to realize my sense of smell. And I started to realize... more strongly, the feeling of my skin, when we turned a corner and a little wind blew by. Or when we'd go into the room and the air would be still', observed one audience member, 'Another part might be [that] our eyes actually restrict us—that they stop us from feeling. If I was with the dancer,

walking around the room, I would be looking at him to see what was happening on his face, reading some story about what he was thinking... But I didn't have to do that. All I felt was the heat of his skin, the way that his body was moving. That he was sweating. You could hear his breath sometimes... the complexity of visual language was stripped away'.³ Director Martial Chazallon has views to offer too: by examining the 'intimate and collective memories of the body', *DYSWIM* questions 'our connection to the environment'. Performances serve to 'bring audiences into that environment and transform their bodies, others, and the city... It's more of an encounter that we are putting together, without knowing the outcome of that encounter... The project is about seeing without seeing'.⁴

Visual literacy is one of our most dependable toolkits for city living, and a trusted currency for relating and communicating. The spatialised effects of stripping back this embodied competence, is a matter of interest to geographers engaged in exploring and sensing the aesthetic and political possibilities of embodied and sensual geographies. Haptic and tactile, *DYSWIM* offers one testing ground for feeling bodies. It produced sites for what Mark Paterson terms 'somatic sensations', and Michael Crang describes as 'haptic knowledges'.⁵ Sensing the city otherwise, opens up possibilities for visceral encounters in an urban terrain reconfigured as an assemblage of bodies, surfaces, smells and acoustics. By depriving audience members of their power to see for several hours, *DYSWIM* asked participants to enter into a rich sensory realm, and in doing so, momentarily destabilized and scrambled the primacy of vision. Taking up Lisa Law's notion that the senses represent a 'situated practice', the project provided for alternative ways of connecting sensing bodies to a spatial politics and for engaging with and feeling public life differently.⁶

The felt world is our very essence, but it is also what we mostly take for granted, and then struggle to represent satisfactorily. Can realities be augmented by measured removal? Might it be that by taking something away, it's possible to squeeze a little more from

embodied experience? The experience of removing the blindfold at journey's end is to be reminded of a form of sensual "blindness" hiding in plain sight. We hold on to this effort as an invitation for geographers to continue to experience and collaborate, in particular with artists who possess long histories and methods of working with bodies and feelings—an exchange that can only enrich our practice of embodied geographical thought and practice.

Notes

1 Created in 2005, *DYSWIM* has been staged in Paris, Marseille, Lyon, Montreal and Geneva (see www.projet-insitu.com/accueil-english.html). Caleb produced the Vancouver adaptation of the project through his performing arts society (see <http://www.calebjohnston.ca/do-you-see-what-i-mean/>); Hayden participated as a blindfolded audience member.

2 Interview with Alex Ferguson, 7 February 2013.

3 Interview with Jay White, 31 January 2013.

4 Field note, 19 January 2013.

5 M. Paterson, 'Haptic geographies: ethnography, haptic knowledges and sensuous dispositions', *Progress in human geography* 33 (2007), pp. 766-788; M. Crang, 'Qualitative methods: touchy, feely, look-see?', *Progress in human geography* 27 (2003), pp. 494-504.

6 L. Law, 'Home cooking: Filipino women and geographies of the senses in Hong Kong', *Cultural geographies* 8 (2001), pp. 264-283; see also, Q. H. Tan, 'Smell in the city: smoking and olfactory politics', *Urban studies* 50 (2013), pp. 55-71.

Caleb Johnston is a Lecturer in Human Geography at the University of Edinburgh. His work engages cities, social justice, art and politics.

Hayden Lorimer teaches geography at University of Glasgow where he is Reader in Human Geography. His writes and researches on landscape, memory and the life of the senses.